

# WILLOW CREEK ROAD REROUTE

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OR-05-027-071

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Andrews Resource Area, Burns District, is responding to a request from private property owners proposing to replace a portion of road that accesses their private property on the eastern slope of Steens Mountain. The private land is located within the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA), more specifically in Section 16, T. 33 S., R. 34 E. The property includes a small cabin.

The current access road to the property crosses Willow Creek which is habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Access to the private land is difficult during spring and early summer when water volume in the creek is high. The Willow Creek Road also crosses about 1.35 miles of the High Steens Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The attached map shows the existing access road and the proposed new route.

A. Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed reroute is to find a better route location that improves access for the private landowners while protecting natural resource values. The reroute is needed so the landowners can access the private land during times of high water levels in Willow Creek. Currently, motorized access to the private property is restricted until mid-June each year from high water levels in Willow Creek and the movement of large rocks that block vehicular use at the stream crossing. A caterpillar tractor is needed most years to clear debris from the creek crossing. The landowner has requested cross-country motorized travel along the proposed route and maintains that the proposed route is more reasonable both in terms of providing better access to his property and by negating the need to put a caterpillar tractor in the creek to perform maintenance. This proposal benefits Lahontan cutthroat trout by eliminating the existing road across Willow Creek and also benefits the High Steens WSA by reducing motorized route distance by about one-quarter mile.

B. Conformance with Land Use Plans, Laws, Regulations and Policy

The proposal conforms to the CMPA Resource Management Plan (RMP). It also conforms to the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000, by expanding cooperative management activities between private landowners and public land managers and by providing reasonable access for the private landowner.

Section 603 (c) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) requires that areas designated as WSAs be managed so as to not impair the area's suitability for preservation as wilderness. The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) Interim Management Policy for Lands under Wilderness Review (WSA IMP; BLM Manual Handbook, H-8550-1) describes activities that may be suitable within WSAs. Chapter I., B. 6. describes as allowable actions those that clearly benefit a WSA's wilderness values through activities that restore, protect, or maintain these values. An illustration of this concept is provided later in this section, "Any negative impacts to wilderness values could be clearly offset by the positive benefits of protecting in a more natural condition a special feature of the wilderness resource." Chapter III. A. 3 states that . . . "The BLM is required by law to provide such enjoyment of non-Federally owned land which is completely surrounded or isolated by public lands administered under FLPMA. In determining adequate access, the BLM has discretion to evaluate such things as proposed construction methods and location, to consider reasonable alternatives (trails, access routes, . . . and degree of development. The BLM, however, must provide a degree of access that is commensurate with the reasonable use and enjoyment of the non-Federal land. The BLM must also consider such things as . . . the use of existing access over non-Federal or public lands."

This action can be considered in conformance with Section 603 (c) of FLPMA and with the specific provisions of the IMP.

## CHAPTER II: ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

### A. No Action

Use of the existing road would continue. Access across Willow Creek would continue to be difficult or impossible during periods of high water flow. Periodic maintenance of the road within the stream with heavy equipment would continue to be necessary to remove boulders that are washed into the route.

### B. Proposed Action

The route would be relocated as shown on the attached map. Route relocation across private land in Section 14 has been granted by the landowner. The stream crossing on public land would be eliminated and motorized access across the WSA would be reduced by about 0.24-mile. The retired portion of road, except for a small parking area at the SE¼SE¼ of Section 15 within the existing road, would be closed to motorized and mechanized vehicle use by placing boulders in the roadway. Following road closure, the underlying lands would be added to the High Steens WSA. This road would also be rehabilitated using a caterpillar tractor with rippers to accelerate reclamation and further discourage use. Ripping of the existing roadway would not occur along the stream crossing approaches to eliminate potential sediment input. The old roadbed would be drug with a spike-toothed harrow to eliminate caterpillar tracks if necessary. The new route would become a "way" within the WSA which would be developed and maintained solely by the passage of vehicles.

C. Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

A power line route that leads to the cabin was considered initially as a possible alternate route, however, the route used during construction of the line was hard to locate and meandered through large boulders. This route is longer than the proposed action and would require backhoe work to move large boulders from the pathway causing additional effects to the WSA. The BLM and private landowners located the proposed route to minimize impacts to the WSA so the power line route was dropped from further analysis.

### CHAPTER III: DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Critical Elements:

The following critical elements of the human environment are either not known to be present or known not to be affected by the proposed action or other alternatives: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Air Quality, American Indian Traditional Practices, Cultural Heritage, Environmental Justice, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Flood Plains, Hazardous Materials, Paleontology, Special Status Species – Flora, Water Quality (drinking/groundwater), Wild and Scenic Rivers.

The following critical elements are present and may be affected by the proposed action or no action alternative:

A. Wilderness Study Areas

High Steens WSA was reduced to 13,965 acres from 69,740 with designation of Steens Mountain Wilderness. Remaining segments of the WSA are located north of the Steens Loop Road and along the lower east face of Steens Mountain. Wilderness characteristics of High Steens WSA are summarized from Volume I of the Oregon BLM Wilderness Study Report (1991).

Wilderness characteristics include naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and the presence of special features. The following definitions are from BLM Manual Handbook H-8550-1 – Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review (WSA IMP). **Naturalness** - refers to an area which "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." **Solitude** - is defined as "the state of being alone or remote from habitations; isolation. A lonely, unfrequented, or secluded place." **Primitive and Unconfined Recreation** - is defined as nonmotorized and undeveloped types of outdoor recreation activities. **Special Features** - are listed in the Wilderness Act as "ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value."

**Naturalness:** High Steens WSA appears to be in outstanding natural condition. This WSA contains a variety of physical features which are the result of volcanism, faulting, and erosional processes. High Steens WSA has a variety of wildlife habitat and diverse fauna. Talus slopes, ponds, and trees and high elevation fescue grasslands are special wildlife habitats. The WSA contains summer and crucial mule deer habitat, elk summer habitat, and summer and yearlong pronghorn antelope range. Riparian areas support beaver, a variety of songbirds, reptiles, and amphibians. The WSA supports habitat for upland game birds, summering raptors, and small mammals. There are three ways totaling 5.30 miles, eight fences totaling 6.90 miles, two fire rehabilitation seedings totaling 177 acres, and several locations of mining activity. (The number of unnatural features has been adjusted to reflect new features in the WSA and changes resulting from designation of wilderness.) Rough topography reduces the influence of these developments on the area's naturalness. Outside sights and sounds are not imposing and emanate from the boundary roads and the light traffic on them. [Note: The Willow Creek Road is a boundary road. Cherrystem roads are not specifically described in the Wilderness Study Report because they are technically not inside the WSA. Cherrystem roads are always boundary roads.]

**Solitude:** High Steens WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. These opportunities are enhanced by the varied and rugged topography. The extreme difference in elevations is the major screening factor. The drainages provide excellent opportunities for isolation. The eastern portions are completely screened from the northern segments. Vegetative screening also provides some opportunities for solitude. Aspens, willows, and other riparian species in the drainages provide screening. However, the WSA as a whole does not contain enough vegetation to appreciably enhance opportunities for solitude.

**Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation in High Steens WSA are outstanding. The primitive recreation activities include day hiking, backpacking, camping, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, sightseeing, and photography. Species which can be hunted include mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, and upland game birds. Fishing opportunities are outstanding, especially in McCoy Creek and its tributaries. Sightseeing and photographic opportunities abound. The rugged and sheer rock escarpments create fascinating views.

**Special Features:** Geology, vegetation, wildlife, and scenic qualities substantially enhance the area's wilderness characteristics. The geology is the dominant special feature. Steens Mountain is a fault block mountain that dips gently westward and reaches a maximum elevation of 9,773 feet, with a 5,500 foot scarp on the east. Most of High Steens WSA contains outstanding scenery. Bighorn sheep, Greater sage-grouse, Lahontan cutthroat trout, redband trout, pika, and northern water shrew contribute to making wildlife a special feature. Additionally, Steens Mountain is an important raptor foraging area.

B. Migratory Birds

Several species of migratory birds use the riparian corridors and uplands in the area. Species that should be present include horned lark, western meadowlark, American goldfinch, yellow warbler, and other grassland and riparian species common to the area.

C. Special Status Species – Fauna

Bighorn sheep may use this area during the winter. This area is shown as sage-grouse habitat on the habitat map developed by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), but due to past fires, much of the area is devoid of sagebrush. Sign of sage-grouse (feces) were observed at the proposed project site. No pygmy rabbits or sign were observed. No other Special Status Species were observed in the area.

Willow Creek provides approximately 1.25 miles of stream habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi*), a Federally listed species (threatened) pursuant to the ESA. The population that inhabits Willow Creek was transplanted from the east side of Trout Creek Mountains (Willow/Whitehorse Creek drainage) in late 1970 to early 1980. The lower extent of occupied habitat is located a few hundred yards downstream of the Willow Creek Road crossing. Although spawning and incubation of Lahontan cutthroat trout may occur at the existing road crossing, observations indicate the stream substrate is dominated by large gravel with interspersed sand sized particles, and is not likely suitable spawning habitat.

D. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

The riparian community on Willow Creek is dominated by cottonwood and willow in the vicinity of the Willow Creek Road and stream crossing. The public land portion of the stream is found to be in Properly Functioning Condition.

E. Noxious Weeds

Scotch thistle is present but scarce near the proposed route. The BLM and private landowner work cooperatively to reduce the occurrence of weeds in the area. No other noxious weeds were found during the botanical inventory.

Noncritical Elements:

The following noncritical elements of the human environment may be present and affected by the proposed action and alternatives:



A. Recreation/Off-Highway Vehicle Designation

The project is located within the Steens Mountain CMPA/Steens Mountain Special Recreation Management Area. Primary recreation uses in the project area include sightseeing, camping, wildlife viewing, hunting, and photography. The season of use is generally from July to November, with the highest use during the fall hunting seasons. In the past, use has been very light because access to the project area was by landowner permission only. However, in 2005 ODFW acquired Access and Habitat easements across the private lands adjacent to East Steens Road, which could increase the amount of recreation-related use.

Mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and elk are hunted with rifle, muzzleloader, and bow in the project area. Upland bird hunting, primarily for chukars and quail, is a popular late fall and winter activity.

All motorized and mechanized vehicle use in High Steens WSA is "Limited to Designated Routes." Cross-country vehicle travel is not allowed.

B. Visual Resources

High Steens WSA is a Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I area. The VRM Class I objective is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude limited management activity. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low and must not attract attention.

The project area is located on a gently sloping alluvial fan at the base of Steens Mountain. Landscape lines are very low-angle diagonals, which are strengthened in some locations by dark-green riparian vegetation. In addition to the riparian vegetation, landscape colors are predominantly light tan (annual vegetation), grayish green (perennial vegetation), and light brown (soils). Landscape textures are generally smooth and uniform, except along the riparian areas where textures are rough. Man-made features add sinuous linear bands (cherry stem road) and short vertical lines (fenceposts) to the landscape.

C. Soils

The soils on the site for the new route are very deep, well-drained sandy loams on from 3 to 8 percent slopes. They are formed on old lake terraces or alluvial fans and have a low potential for erosion.

D. Vegetation

The proposed new route is in a plant community dominated by basin big sagebrush and cheatgrass. Other perennial plant species present on the site include bluebunch wheatgrass, squirreltail, Sandberg's bluegrass, lupine, skeletonweed, hoary aster, gray rabbitbrush, and little-leaf horsebrush. The site is in an area with frequent fires and is in early seral ecological condition.

E. Wildlife

The project area is used by mule deer, pronghorn antelope, coyotes, ravens, golden eagles, turkey vultures, chukar partridge, cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, snakes, and lizards.

F. Transportation/Roads

Public access to this vicinity of the CMPA is somewhat limited due to the extent of private land in the area. The ODFW has a public access easement along the private portion of the existing road. The public land road closure would start about 100 feet from the southeast corner of Section 15 to provide a parking corridor for hikers and hunters. The new route within the WSA would not be available for public use unless an easement for the new road on private land is granted by the landowner.

## CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The following elements would be affected through implementation of the proposed action or alternatives:

Critical Elements:

A. Wilderness Study Areas

The BLM is required to avoid impairment to wilderness characteristics of WSAs until Congress passes legislation either designating WSAs as wilderness or releasing them from wilderness consideration. To foster efficient wilderness management, it is BLM's policy to minimize the establishment of new, discretionary uses in WSAs that would be incompatible with possible wilderness designation, even when the uses would not, in themselves, exceed the nonimpairment standard (WSA IMP, p. 17). The IMP also allows for consideration of enhancing wilderness characteristics while allowing other activities, and recognizes the need to provide reasonable access to private landowners (WSA IMP, pp. 10-11, 29-30).

No Action Alternative: *Naturalness*: Naturalness of High Steens would not be affected because new vehicle routes would not be created. The Willow Creek Road would remain as a cherrystem road with road maintenance confined to the cherrystem corridor.

***Solitude:*** There would be no new effects to solitude. The occasional effects to solitude from vehicles using the existing cherrystem road would continue.

***Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:*** There would be no new effects to primitive and unconfined recreation. Nonmotorized and undeveloped recreation would continue in the WSA.

***Special Features:*** Special features would not be affected. Occasional use of the cherrystem road and creek crossing would continue. Even though Willow Creek is cutthroat trout habitat, it is one of seven creeks in High Steens WSA that contain cutthroat trout.

Proposed Action: The WSA IMP nonimpairment criteria (p. 9 Ch.1.2.a. and b.) prohibit the installation of new facilities and new activities in WSAs that are not temporary, create surface disturbance, or involve permanent placement of facilities. Some exceptions to this include uses and activities which are grandfathered or valid existing rights or that clearly protect or enhance the land's wilderness characteristics. This proposal enhances wilderness values by reducing the motorized route distance across the WSA and by protecting Lahontan cutthroat trout, an identified special feature of the WSA. The proposal also provides for reasonable access for the private landowners.

***Naturalness:*** Naturalness would be affected in that a new man-made feature, a vehicle route approximately one-half mile long, would be created. Vegetation crushing and soil compaction would contribute to the effects to naturalness.

***Solitude:*** Effects to solitude could increase because of the longer time period during which vehicles could be used to access the private land. Conversely, the reduction of public vehicle access to the area could enhance the feeling of solitude. Increased solitude within the riparian corridor would be experienced due to the elimination of the vehicle route within the riparian corridor.

***Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:*** There would be no new effects to primitive and unconfined recreation. Nonmotorized and undeveloped recreation would continue in the WSA around the new access route.

***Special Features:*** The cutthroat trout special feature would be protected.

## B. Migratory Birds

No Action Alternative: Species in the near vicinity of the stream crossing would continue to be temporarily disturbed when vehicles cross the creek. This disturbance is short lived and infrequent.

Proposed Action: Migratory birds would benefit from the reduction of human activity at the present creek crossing and improvement of riparian habitat.

C. Special Status Species - Fauna

**No Action Alternative:** Continued use and maintenance of the Willow Creek Road creek crossing would contribute periodic streambed disturbance, and preclude establishment of stream cover (riparian tree canopy) over approximately 10 feet of stream. Disturbance of the streambed could affect Lahontan cutthroat trout spawning and incubation success through physical disturbance of spawning sites at the road crossing or fine sediment intrusion into redds (nests) located immediately downstream. However, observations indicate that the stream substrate is dominated by large gravel with interspersed sand sized particles, and is not likely suitable spawning habitat.

**Proposed Action:** The proposed new route location would not affect Lahontan cutthroat trout or habitat. Discontinuing use and maintenance of the existing stream crossing would eliminate potential disturbance to Lahontan cutthroat trout spawning, incubation and juvenile rearing and enhance habitat. The riparian vegetation (willow/cottonwood/alder) is expected to naturally colonize the existing road crossing and provide additional cover for fish.

D. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

**No Action Alternative:** Continued use and maintenance of the Willow Creek Road crossing on Willow Creek would preclude establishment of riparian vegetation, such as willow and cottonwood, on the approximate 10 feet of stream corridor associated with the road crossing.

**Proposed Action:** The proposed new route location would not affect riparian-wetland habitat. Discontinuing use and maintenance of the existing stream crossing is expected to result in natural recolonization of riparian vegetation (willow/cottonwood/alder) at the existing road crossing.

E. Noxious Weeds

The current weed abatement program should keep noxious weeds from invading the new route. New found weeds would be controlled before they could spread.

Noncritical Elements:

The following elements could be affected through implementation of the proposed action or alternatives.

A. Recreation/Off Highway Vehicles

**No Action Alternative:** There would be no effects to recreation from the no action alternative.

Proposed Action: The public would lose about 1.30 miles of motorized access along the cherrystem road. Public access along the existing private road is currently allowed under an easement with ODFW. The public would be allowed to park on the existing cherrystem road and utilize the public land on foot. Overall, recreation would not be affected, because public access has been minimal and use has been light. There would continue to be access to public lands over the existing ODFW easement.

B. Visual Resources

No Action Alternative: There would be no effects to Visual Resources from the No Action Alternative. VRM Class I objectives would be met.

Proposed Action: The Proposed Action would introduce a new man-caused linear feature into the landscape. Color contrasts along the new route would increase with the removal of vegetation and increased soil exposure. However, vehicle use along the "way" would be less than what occurs on the cherrystem road. The new "way" would be less visually intrusive than the existing cherrystem road. Rehabilitation of the existing cherrystem road would reduce the line and color contrasts associated with this feature. VRM Class I objectives would be met.

C. Soils

No Action Alternative: Since there would be no new ground disturbance, soils located on the proposed new route would not be affected under this alternative. The existing route would continue to be used occasionally creating more soil compaction on that site.

Proposed Action: Soils along the proposed new route would become compacted from occasional motor vehicle use and some vegetation would stop growing within the tire tracks. The chance for erosion from this disturbance would be low due to the characteristics of the soil. Soil compaction along the existing route would be mitigated through the rehabilitation efforts.

D. Vegetation

No Action Alternative: Since there would be no new ground disturbance, vegetation would not be affected on the proposed new route.

Proposed Action: Some vegetation would be removed from the action of vehicles driving the new route. Vegetation would reestablish on the old route when it is closed and rehabilitated.

E. Wildlife

Effects to Lahontan cutthroat trout are described under Special Status Species - Fauna.

F. Transportation/Roads

No Action Alternative: There would be no effect to the road system under this alternative.

Proposed Action: Approximately 0.71-mile of cherrystem road would be closed and replaced by 0.47-mile of "way" within the WSA. There would not be public access across the private land portion of the new route so the public would lose about 1.30 miles of motorized access on the cherrystem road. Private landowner access to their property would be extended over a longer period since the stream crossing would no longer be required.

CHAPTER V: MITIGATING MEASURES

- 1) Rehabilitating the closed cherrystem road by ripping, recontouring and seeding it with native species would assist in keeping vehicles off the area and accelerate revegetation efforts. Stream approaches would be recontoured if necessary to prevent overflow from running down the road.
- 2) Clearly mark the "parking corridor" to ensure vehicles do not trespass in the WSA.

CHAPTER VI: CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

No Action Alternative: There are no cumulative effects associated with this alternative.

Proposed Action: About 104.00 miles of motorized access was lost in 2000 upon designation of the Steens Mountain Wilderness Area. Another 6.00 miles of motorized routes were closed in 2005 as part of the Steens Mountain RMP. There are about 490.00 miles of documented motorized routes remaining in the CMPA and the possibility of adding about 50.00 miles as part of the ongoing Travel Plan process.

While 1.30 miles of cherrystem road would be closed under this alternative, physical access to the public land would not be reduced. People could still access the public land by nonmotorized and nonmechanized means. The current easement across the private land in Sections 14 and 23 expires in 4½ years so long-term access is not guaranteed.

As the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), in guidance issued on June 24, 2005, points out, the "environmental analysis required under NEPA is forward-looking," and review of past actions is required only "to the extent that this review informs agency decision-making regarding the proposed action." Use of information on the effects on past action may be useful in two ways according to the CEQ guidance. One is for consideration of the proposed action's cumulative effects, and secondly as a basis for identifying the proposed action's direct and indirect effects.

The CEQ stated in this guidance that "[g]enerally, agencies can conduct an adequate cumulative effects analysis by focusing on the current aggregate effects of past actions without delving into the historical details of individual past actions." This is because a description of the current state of the environment inherently includes the effects of past actions. The CEQ guidance specifies that the "CEQ regulations do not require the consideration of the individual effects of all past actions to determine the present effects of past actions." Our information on the current environmental condition is more comprehensive and more accurate for establishing a useful starting point for a cumulative effects analysis, than attempting to establish such a starting point by adding up the described effects of individual past actions to some environmental baseline condition in the past that, unlike current conditions, can no longer be verified by direct examination.

The second area in which the CEQ guidance states that information on past actions may be useful is in "illuminating or predicting the direct and indirect effects of a proposed action." The usefulness of such information is limited by the fact that it is anecdotal only, and extrapolation of data from such singular experiences is not generally accepted as a reliable predictor of effects. In this case, the basis for predicting the direct and indirect effects of the proposed action and its alternatives is based on the general accumulated experience of the resource professionals in the agency with similar actions.

Internal scoping for this project did not identify any need to exhaustively list individual past actions or analyze, compare, or describe the environmental effects of individual past actions in order to complete an analysis which would be useful for illuminating or predicting the effects of the proposed action. Selection of the proposed action or the no action alternative would not affect the use or closure of other routes within the CMPA.

## CHAPTER VII: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

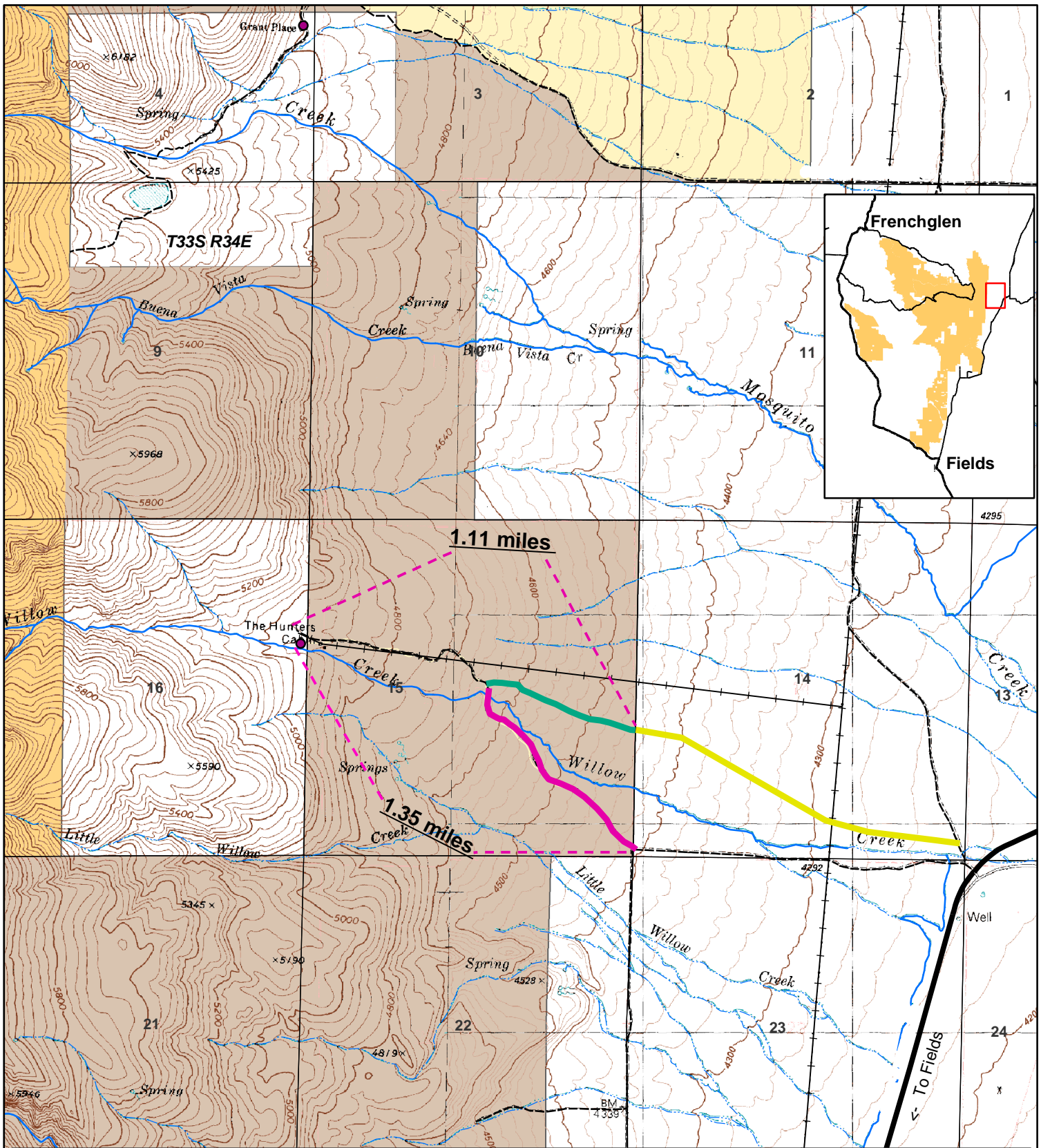
### A. Participating Staff

Karla Bird, Andrews Resource Area Field Manager  
Dan Braden, Archaeologist  
Darren Brumback, Fisheries Biologist  
Gary Foulkes, Planning and Environmental Coordinator  
Eric Haakenson, Rangeland Management Specialist  
Rick Hall, Natural Resource Specialist  
Kelly Hazen, Geographic Information Systems  
Doug Linn, Botanist  
Matt Obradovich, Wildlife Biologist  
Lesley Richman, District Weed Specialist  
Mark Sherbourne, Natural Resource Specialist  
Evelyn Treiman, Outdoor Recreation Planner

B. Persons, Groups, and Agencies Consulted

Ed Davis, landowner  
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Hines  
Walt Selisch, landowner  
Steens Mountain Advisory Council  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland





### WSA Re-Route EA (Hunters Cabin Access)

- Proposed Route in WSA
- Proposed Road Closure
- Proposed Road On Private Land
- Non-Paved Improved Road (East Steens Road)
- Primitive or Unknown Road Condition

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- Powerline
- The Hunters Cabin
- Private
- BLM Administered Land
- Wilderness Study Area
- Wilderness

3

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US DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Bureau of Land Management  
Burns District, Oregon  
26 Andrews Resource Area



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